

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 509

PS 009 206

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TITLE Motherese, Fatherese, Androgynese.
SPONS AGENCY Indiana Univ., Bloomington.
PUB DATE Feb 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at "Toward the Competent Parent: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Parenting" (Atlanta, Georgia, February 21-22, 1977) ; Best copy available; Study funded by Women's Studies Program, Indiana University

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; Fathers; *Infants; *Language Research; *Language Styles; Limited Experience; Mothers; Parent Child Relationship; Preschool Children; *Sex Differences; Sex Role; *Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Bem Sex Role Inventory

ABSTRACT

This study attempted to determine whether documented stylistic differences in the way males and females modify their speech to young children results from sex typing or from differential experience with children. A 3 by 2 design was employed: sex-typing (highly masculine, highly feminine, or androgynous) by experience (high or low). Forty-one adults (20 males, 21 females) were classified using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory and ratings of experience with children. Subjects were instructed to look at a book with an imaginary 2-year-old. Protocols were scored as to the total word output, the number of words per sentence, simplifications and elaborations of the text. Results indicate that experience is more important than sex-typing in determining how adults talk to children. (Author/SB)

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MOTHERESE, FATHERESE, ANDROGYNESE

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PS 009266

This study was funded by a grant from the Women's Studies Program,
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Introduction

One common method of discovering good parenting techniques is to find out what good parents (usually mothers) actually do, the assumption being that good parents know what they are doing. But how does this knowledge develop? To improve parenting skills, we need to study not just the knowledge that parents have, but the conditions that seem to foster its development.

This study represents a preliminary attempt to look at non-parental, as well as parental speech to young children. This investigation has attempted to elucidate:

(1) whether adults, regardless of sex-typing and experience, share the same tacit knowledge about how one ought to talk to children.

(2) whether the way we talk to young children develops as a natural result of experience.

(3) whether the feminine socialization process, in some way, better prepares one to interact with children.

Recent studies have shown that mothers modify their speech when talking to young children (Snow, 1972; Newport, 1977). This special way of talking, coined "motherese," is characterized in the following manner.

"Motherese" is reflected in shorter mean length of utterance (hereafter to be referred to as MLU) and reduced overall output of speech. It is further characterized by many repetitions and by utterances that are well formed, although rather simplistic with regard to phonology and syntax.

It has been suggested that "motherese" thus provides an especially appropriate model for the young child in the beginning stages of language acquisition.

Several very recent studies have also looked at paternal speech and found that fathers also alter the way they talk to young children (Stein, 1976; Weintraub, 1976). "Fatherese," however, seems to differ stylistically from "motherese." "Fatherese" tends to have longer utterances and more total language output than "motherese." Fathers also paraphrased to a greater degree than did mothers, thus producing more modifications in their speech to children.

A common assumption of this work is that differences between "motherese" and "fatherese" result from differences in sex-typing of the parents. That is, it is assumed that fathers' and mothers' interactions with their children are a function of how they each perceive their role as to caretaking responsibilities dictated by their sex-role. If this is true, we hypothesized that androgynous people should speak "androgynese."

Androgyny has been explained in the following way. First, masculinity and femininity have been, up until now, considered to be bipolar ends of a single continuum. That is, a person was considered as either masculine or feminine, not both. This, however, does not permit a person to be both masculine and feminine depending on the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors. Therefore, in the aforementioned conception of masculinity-femininity, strongly sex-typed persons would be seriously limited in the range of behaviors available to them as they move from situation to situation. A mixed or androgynous self-concept would thus allow an individual to freely engage in both "masculine" and "feminine" behavior. For example, an androgynous person may be assertive or submissive depending on the demands of the situation. A strongly sex-typed person would or could not.

In order to determine androgyny, Sandra Bem (1974) has developed a measure, "The Bem Sex-Role Inventory," in which the person's attained androgyny score reflects the relative amounts of masculinity and femininity that the person includes in his or her own self description.

Therefore, "androgynese," if it exists, might be similar to "motherese" or be different than either "motherese" or "fatherese." That is, an androgynous person, regardless of sex, would respond according to the demands of the situation. Since it is still an open question as to what is the most appropriate manner of talking to children, we cannot be sure that "motherese" is the most appropriate behavior.

Mothers, however, differ from fathers in more than just their sex: mothers spend more time with their children than do fathers (Rebelsky and Hanks, 1971). Rebelsky and Hanks found that fathers spend an amazingly low 37.7 seconds, per day, on the average, in verbal interaction with their infants. Further, when fathers are with their young children, it is often times in a different capacity than the mothers, exhibiting physical rather than verbal behavior. So, in fact, sex-typing and experience with children are confounded when we compare mothers and fathers.

Method

The present study looks at the relative effects of sex-typing and experience on the types of linguistic modifications that adults make when speaking to young children. Our sample was selected from among both undergraduate and graduate students on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire consisting of the "Bem Sex-Role Inventory" and ratings of experience with children.

Subjects were classified as low experience if they rated themselves at the low end of a ten point scale:

(1) I have had no contact with young children.

(or)

(2) I have seldom been around young children, maybe once a year.

Subjects were classified as high experience if they rated themselves at the high end of the scale:

(9) For at least one year, I have had extensive contact with a young child; for example, a younger sibling, nephew or niece.

(or)

(10) I have had extensive caretaking responsibility for a child; for example, as a parent or day care worker or teacher.

The subjects for this investigation consisted of 41 adults, 20 males (11 low experience with children, 9 high experience with children) and 21 females (10 low experience with children, 11 high experience with children). Of these 10 were androgynous (5 high experience with children, 5 low experience with children). The remaining 31 subjects were highly sex-typed males and females.

The subjects were then told that they were to look at a book with an imaginary two-year-old child. They were instructed to present the story in as natural way as possible and that this was a study looking at how adults think they should talk to young children. The stimulus book used was Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. In each instance, the subject was alone in the room during his/her presentation. The sessions were taperecorded and later transcribed verbatim and typed. The protocols were first scored as to the total word output and the number of words per sentence. In an attempt to discover what accounted for differences in output and sentence length, simplifications from the text (lexical and structural changes and omissions), and elaborations from the text,

both intra- and extra-sentential, were also scored. [Extra-sentential elaborations were scored as to sentence type: deixis, wh-questions, yes-no questions, interjections, declaratives and imperatives. Previous studies have not scored for simplifications and elaborations.

A 3 X 2 analysis of variance design was employed, (sex-typed, masculine, feminine and androgynous X high and low experience with children).

Using role play rather than real children, of course, results in a somewhat artificial situation. Since we were using low experience adults, that is, non-parents, it is obvious that we could not use the children of our high experience adults. It has also been found that both mothers and fathers provide more information to their same-sex child when reading a story (Stein, 1976). Because of this sex of child-sex of adult interaction, and because children differ so much in their responsiveness due to fatigue, attention span, interests, etc., it would have introduced many new variables if we had used actual children. Aside from this fact, what we were interested in was how adults think they ought to talk to young children. The subjects in our study seemed to feel that this was a reasonable task and did, in fact, make many modifications in their linguistic performance.

The .05 level of significance was used as a decision criterion, although .10 was considered to be borderline significance.

Results and Discussion

Androgynese. As was discussed above, it was expected that androgynous males and females would perform much the same way as each other.

The results indicated that contrary to what we believed, androgynous males and females performed much the same way as did their appropriate sex-typed counterparts. That is, androgynous males performed more like sex-typed males and androgynous females more like sex-typed females. We therefore concluded that no one speaks "androgynese."

Two possible conclusions concerning androgyny are indicated:

First, we should probably take a second look at the tool used to measure androgyny. It could be that the "Bem Sex-Role Inventory" is not measuring anything appropriate for our task. More research should be done in this area, in that the "Bem Sex-Role Inventory" has not been widely used or tested in many circumstances and settings.

Second, perhaps sex-typing may not be as important in adult-child interactions as previously assumed. This point will be discussed further in the section following, discussing the interaction of sex and experience.

Since androgyny apparently wasn't a measure of anything significant in this study, subsequent analysis combined androgynous males and females with their appropriate sex. This resulted in a 2 X 2 design (Sex X Experience), and considered differences in 1) total word output, 2) the average number of words per utterance, 3) the number of simplifications, and 4) the number of elaborations.

Sex and Experience. There were no significant differences with regard to simplification or elaboration, so we will restrict our discussion to a total output and words per utterance.

Contrary to previous findings, we found no significant sex differences for total output and found that females produced longer

utterances ($p. < .01$) than did males. The biggest sex difference was between the low experience subjects. As a group, then our females did not speak normal "motherese," nor did our males speak normal "fatherese." We begin to get a clearer picture when we consider the variable of experience. In particular, we find:

(1) With experience, the general trend is to produce less total output and shorter utterances (marginally significant, $p. < .1$).

(2) With more experience, the difference between the sexes becomes less.

(3) Experience accounts for more change in females than it does in males.

Each of these points will now be given individual consideration.

First, with experience, the general trend is to produce less total language output and shorter utterances when talking to children. The fact that experience resulted in shorter total word output and shorter utterances was clearly understood and expected. The more experience one has with young children the more likely she/he is to produce shorter and fewer sentences to facilitate understanding by a small child. What is interesting here was the fact that this marginal significant differences in total language output ($p. < .1$) by experience, was accompanied with an insignificant difference due to sex, ($p. < .7$). This indicates that with experience, both men and women learn to alter their speech and thus eradicates any sex differences that were apparent before.

If this description of experienced and inexperienced adults sounds somewhat familiar, it is because these were precisely the definitions of "motherese" and "fatherese." It therefore appears that "fatherese" is, in fact, not that language pattern used by fathers, but rather, that

language used by inexperienced speakers to children, both males and females. In the same vein, "motherese" appears to be the language of those experienced with children, again, both females and males.

Second, with more experience, the difference between the sexes becomes less. This finding would indicate that experience is indeed an important determinant in how adults think they should talk to children; thus, substantiating the first point.

Finally, experience accounted for more change in females than it did in males.

Our data show that the difference between high and low experienced females in regard to total word output and mean length of utterance was marginally significant, ($p < .1$), while the difference between males was not, ($p < .4$). This finding was not expected for two reasons:

First, in the past, research has shown that males are more affected by experience with children in terms of change in behavior (Condry and Condry, 1976). Condry and Condry, however, were not looking at adult-child interaction, but adult rating of infants' emotional responses to different arousing stimuli.

Second, Snow (1972) has shown that experienced mothers were not significantly better than non-mothers in predicting the speech style modifications required by young children. We believe that the discrepancy in data here is represented by a probable difference in categorization of subjects. Snow chose her subjects purely on the basis of "motherness." That is, her subjects were either mothers or they were not. Our study represents a premiere study in which participants were grouped according to experience with children, rather than just "motherness."

As is quite evident, one need not be a parent, more specifically a mother, to have had experience with children. It could very well be that Snow's non-mothers did in fact have experience with children. This would then account for the nonsignificant difference between mothers and non-mothers in her study.

Perhaps our results indicate that with regard to interaction, females benefit more from experience than do males. Females may, in some sense, be conditioned to be more sensitive to feedback from children. It would certainly be adaptive for a primary caregiver to possess such sensitivity.

We can now speculate as to why the low experience females' language pattern resembled "fatherese" even more than did either male group's. The low experience females used longer utterances and gave more total output than did any other group. Perhaps this pattern--typical of "fatherese"--may reflect more than inexperience. It may also reflect high motivation. Our low experience females were education students who no doubt felt stronger pressure to "try hard" to compensate for inexperience, as did fathers in Stein's and Weintraub's studies. For example, females are more likely to go into elementary education, while males are more likely to go into secondary education. Thus, there exists a strong expectation--and pressure--that females will know better how to interact with young children. Finally, low experience females are rare in education classes, and this no doubt increases pressure on them to try hard. Fathers, similarly, were put in a situation in which their interaction patterns with children were compared with that of their wives--a situation that would undoubtedly increase pressure to perform well as a parent.

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Thus, simply talking more may be what people do when they are trying hard to be a good parent, but talking less is what one learns from experience to be more appropriate. In light of this, "fatherese" may reflect both lack of experience and misguided enthusiasm.

Summary

Today, we have looked at males and females and how they think they should talk to young children. This study must be viewed as preliminary study--it must be replicated using "live" children and more subjects--yet it suggests that we should question some assumptions and conclusions from past research. Until now, sex-typing was thought to account for most of the differences found in adult-child interaction patterns. If androgyny has any validity with regard to adult-child interaction, then the lack of "androgynese" suggests that sex-typing may not be the significant criterion. Experience with children appears to be much more important than sex-typing in this regard. We have seen that experience mirrors the differences between "motherese" and "fatherese" and that it reduces sex differences. The finding that experience affects women more than men merits further study.

Perhaps "motherese," the word used to signify the way mothers talk to young children, indicating their competence and understanding, is a misnomer. We have indicated that, indeed, both experienced males and females exhibit similar behavior in regard to the way they talk to young children. Likewise, we have seen that "fatherese" is spoken by both males and females who share a common characteristic, that of inexperience with young children. Maybe what we need is a new word, one that reflects no sex differences, but yet reflects competence with, and understanding of young children. Perhaps..."PARENTESE."

MEANS FOR MALES AND FEMALES WITH HIGH AND LOW EXPERIENCE
WITH CHILDREN (EPC).

TOTAL WORDS

	MALES	FEMALES	
High EPC	527.67	519.27	523.05
Low EPC	557.64	557.00	571.62
	544.15	551.52	

WORDS PER UTTERANCE

	MALES	FEMALES	
High EPC	8.79	9.20	9.01
Low EPC	9.06	9.67	9.35
	8.94	9.42	

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